The Philadelphia
Consolidation of 1854:
A Reappraisal

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N AN EDITORIAL ENTITLED “The New City,” Philadelphia’s North American on February 4, 1854, commented, “We can scarcely find words in which adequately to express that profound and earnest sense of gratification which we feel at the final triumph of Consolidation.” Two days before, the governor had signed a bill consolidating the city and county of Philadelphia, and overnight the city grew from two to one hundred thirty square miles and from a population of 121,000 to one of 409,000. This was the largest single annexation up to that time in the United States, and it also gave Philadelphia the largest area of any American city. Consolidation clearly was a significant event in the city’s history—Philadelphia in fact has not annexed any suburbs since then—and the movement leading to it has been analyzed by several historians.

In his highly influential book, The Private City (1968), Sam Bass Warner, Jr., emphasized the riots that took place in the years prior to consolidation as the main reason for the event. Alarmed elites, he argued, saw consolidation as a way of getting a better police force; social control was the prime motivation, but control came at a high price. By 1860 the city had “regained public order, but as a meaningful

In a study of Philadelphia's nineteenth-century police (1979), David R. Johnson saw the consolidation movement in a similar fashion. Police protection was the paramount issue. "The conflicts of jurisdictions and the inability to achieve concerted action against rowdies, firemen, gangs, and rioters finally convinced enough legislators that a total restructuring of the government was needed."

Howard Gillette, Jr., modified somewhat the law-and-order explanation in The Divided Metropolis: Social and Spatial Dimensions of Philadelphia, 1800-1975 (1980). While recognizing the social control issues, Gillette emphasized the thrust for modernization implied in consolidation, but his conclusions were similar to Warner's. Gillette found the new values of order and efficiency undermining the democratic impulses of the older polity. The most recent analysis of consolidation, Elizabeth M. Geffen's chapter on the city in the 1841-1854 period in the impressive Philadelphia: A 300-Year History (1982), also started with the importance of the riots. Geffen's interpretation reflected Gillette's emphasis on modernization. She paid particular attention to efficiency, citing the statement of one consolidationist that the new charter would eliminate at least 168 tax collectors and result in an annual saving of $100,000. These differences in emphasis notwithstanding, historians have focused substantially on order and efficiency in explaining why Philadelphians sought the consolidation of their city. There is another side to the consolidation story, however, which these historians do not discuss but which is mentioned in a book cited by three (Warner, Gillette and Geffen) as a source for their own work: The History of Consolidation of the City of Philadelphia, written by Eli K. Price in 1873. Price was the leader in the movement,

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and he was even known as "the father of consolidation" for his role in getting the new charter approved in the legislature. To be sure, Price mentioned the need for order and efficiency in his own account, but he emphasized a different part of the history of the movement. He noted that a nonpartisan committee of over 100 Philadelphians prepared the charter in open meetings in the fall of 1853, hammering it out section by section and then debating the draft, much the same way the Founding Fathers did with the Constitution. The state legislature had to approve the final version, but made, Price noted, only "slight and unimportant amendments" to a document drafted in an open and democratic way. The charter itself extended electoral democracy, making the city treasurer, tax assessors, school directors, and guardians of the poor elective offices for the first time. To point out these examples of Jacksonian democracy in the consolidation movement is not to argue that historians focusing on consolidation as an episode in the modernization of the city and its government are necessarily wrong. It seems clear, however, that consolidation can be interpreted in a variety of ways.

Given its importance in shaping public opinion, the riot problem rightly looms large in all the accounts of consolidation. In the first half of the nineteenth century, street riots and similar disturbances were by no means limited to Philadelphia; however, the problem was particularly severe there because the metropolitan area was especially fragmented. Philadelphia itself was only two square miles, extending in a narrow band west from the Delaware to the Schuylkill River and north and south between Vine and South Streets. The rest of the Philadelphia metropolis consisted of over a dozen suburbs, some of them populous industrial districts like Northern Liberties, Kensington, Southwark, Moyamensing, and Passyunk. Neither the city nor the suburbs had large police forces, and for all practical purposes the maintenance of peace in the metropolis was in the hands of the Philadelphia county sheriff, who could deputize volunteers and even

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6 Throughout his career Price was active in promoting municipal improvements, including the creation of Fairmount Park in 1867, and he was the first chairman of the park commission. He was also an expert in real estate law and published works in that field. Biographical sketch in Dictionary of American Biography (New York, 1963), 8:210-211.

7 Price, History of Consolidation of the City of Philadelphia (Philadelphia, 1873), 47.
summon the militia when serious disturbances occurred. But the county sheriff's legal authority, particularly over the militia, was fuzzy, and troops frequently did not respond to the sheriff's call.\(^8\)

The nativist riots in the spring and summer of 1844 made clear that police protection in the metropolis was inadequate. Rioting broke out first in the northern industrial suburb of Kensington where Protestant mill workers attacked Irishmen, the roots of the trouble economic as well as religious.\(^9\) When the militia was finally called in, it was too late to stop the widespread destruction, which included the burning of the church and rectory of St. Michael's parish. In July another Catholic church was burned—St. Augustine's in Philadelphia at 4th Street near Vine. Shortly after that, nativists attacked the militia guarding the Church of St. Philip de Neri in Southwark, just beyond the city's southern limits. While there were no more ethnic riots of this severity, other disturbances occurred in the 1840s. In October 1849, for example, whites attacked a tavern owned by a mulatto and his wife on the south side of the city, touching off a gunbattle between whites and blacks. Rioters set fire to the tavern, and the blaze soon spread to nearby buildings. The militia was finally called in, but it was a case of too much, too late. As the *Evening Bulletin* remarked, "If the sheriff or mayor had at his control an armed band of fifty men, who could have been summoned in ten minutes, the affray would have been put down before it reached a serious character."\(^10\)

Given the riot problem, it is not surprising that concern about law and order figured prominently in the early stages of the consolidation movement. But it is important to note that piecemeal reforms in police administration had made this much less of an issue by the early 1850s, when consolidation actually took place. After the 1844


\(^10\) *Evening Bulletin*, October 10, 1849. Johnson says the new law did not work well, but the evidence he cites involved not riots but administrative disputes among policemen. "Conflict arose," he says, "over who had the right to arrest when two men from different police forces were present. One watchman rescued a prisoner taken by one of the marshal's men. In a more petty instance of antagonism, other officers petitioned to have the new policemen confined to the station house set aside for them." *Policing the Urban Underworld*, 34.
riots, the legislature ordered the city and local governments of nearby suburbs to establish and maintain a police force of one man for each 150 taxable residents.\textsuperscript{11} Legislation passed in 1850, largely in response to the October riot of the previous year, was even more far-reaching. The city and suburban police forces were united under the direction of an elected police marshal. To oversee the force (and, to some extent, the marshal) the legislation also created a police board. The new system apparently worked well enough that in February of 1854, before consolidation took place, the \textit{Evening Bulletin} could boast that Philadelphia had “become the quietest and most orderly city in the Union, while every few weeks we hear of riots, rows, street brawls and midnight assassinations in New York and other cities.”\textsuperscript{12}

The new charter changed the title of the marshal to chief of police and eliminated the police board, making the head of the police force directly responsible to the mayor. But this change was not scheduled to take place until the marshal then in office completed his term in 1857. The leisurely change-over suggests that there was no crisis of public order. In fact, the city councils (Philadelphia had a bicameral system until 1919) passed an ordinance in the fall of 1855 reducing the number of patrolmen on the force from 820 to 650 in the fall of 1855—much to the dismay of the conservative Whig mayor Robert Conrad, who opposed any cut, warning that it would mean “in effect, a return to the old system with all its feebleness, corruption, and inutility.”\textsuperscript{13}

It is difficult to determine why the police force was reduced. Conrad believed policemen should be of “American birth,” with “entire purity of moral character and habits” and “invariable temperance.”\textsuperscript{14} These qualifications were couched in the language of then-current nativist attacks on Irish Catholics, and they may have led Irish members of councils to decide that Philadelphia could do with fewer patrolmen if these were the sort Conrad wanted on his force. Politics were clearly a factor, for the Democrats in particular were not happy with Conrad

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Evening Bulletin}, Feb. 2, 1854.
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{First Annual Message of Robert T. Conrad} (Philadelphia, 1855), 11-12.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 11.
and his conservative views. After the bill reducing the police force passed, the Democratic *Pennsylvanian* announced

The Democrats in the Councils have done their duty faithfully to the public and their party, and there can be none other than an approving voice for their manly devotion to the interest of our City. They have forced a majority who were determined to squander the people's money upon unworthy favorites, to repress their lavish gratuities for political favors performed or expected, and agree to be more honest and less liberal in the future.\(^{15}\)

As the editorial suggests, deficits also played a role, for the city faced financial problems as costs mounted faster than tax revenues after consolidation. To be sure, some in the councils shared Conrad's concern about a reduced police force. One councilman, for example, argued that the bill "would bring the city back to that period when the citizens could not walk the streets with security." But the majority seem to have agreed with another member who noted that "It was the good sense of the people and not the police force which kept the city quiet and orderly."\(^{16}\)

As for the size of the force, it is also worth noting that Conrad did not keep it up to the full strength originally authorized by the councils in 1854. In May, 1855, Conrad pointed this out himself, saying that he had "dispensed with officers whenever and wherever the public service would allow it" as an indication of his "anxious desire to lessen the expenses of the department."\(^{17}\) This may have been a ploy to head off more serious cuts, but it seems unlikely that the mayor would have understaffed the police in the face of serious problems. It should be noted, too, that Conrad signed the bill reducing the force, although he restated his belief that the police force should be large in order to prevent crime.\(^{18}\)

\(^{15}\) *Pennsylvanian*, Nov. 15, 1855. In its editorial of Oct. 26, the *Pennsylvanian* claimed that policemen were bribing councilmen to keep their jobs. The editorial also suggested that Conrad's force was anti-immigrant by remarking that "Attempt at murder is not one of the interdicted offenses—on the contrary, it is the certain road to promotion, provided the victim is of foreign birth."

\(^{16}\) *Public Ledger*, October 26, 1855.

\(^{17}\) *First Annual Message of Robert T. Conrad*, 12.

\(^{18}\) Conrad's message to the councils is in *Journal of Common Council* (November 1, 1855-May 8, 1856), 147-48.
Conrad's successor, Democrat Richard Vaux, was also unhappy with the reduced force. He tried to shame the councils with the example of New York, whose citizens "regard the police with metropolitan pride" and provide the department "with liberal support." The force in that city had 1,100 men and a nearly one million dollar budget, which was three times greater than Philadelphia's. But Vaux had no more luck than Conrad in getting funds for more men. With the exception of about twenty additional patrolmen for harbor and park duty, the police force stayed the same size until the councils finally provided funds for one hundred more policemen in 1865. Even then law and order did not seem a significant factor; requesting more men, Republican mayor Alexander Henry made no mention of disorder and emphasized instead the practical problems of keeping an eye on a burgeoning metropolis with too few men. The city had added 17,250 new buildings since the force was reduced, he said, and the police might have to be withdrawn "from their usual duties in the older portions of the City" to provide patrols in the booming suburban wards unless the force were increased.

Given the evidence, it is hard to believe that law-and-order issues were central to the Philadelphia experience in the early years of consolidation. Warner and Gillette argued that consolidation represented a victory for prohibition and nativist interests, but that does not seem clear-cut either. Gillette emphasized that Eli Price, the consolidation leader, was elected to the state senate with "the help" of the Prohibition party. But it is not clear how much that party helped; Price won an easy victory with the endorsement of several parties besides Prohibitionists. The Sunday Dispatch noted that Price never publicly accepted the Prohibition party nomination, having not given them a written pledge as he had the Consolidation party and

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19 First Annual Message of Richard Vaux (Philadelphia, 1857), 43. Sprogle (p. 105) claims that Vaux increased the force to 1,000 men, but Sprogle supplies no documentation (the book has neither footnotes nor bibliography) and there is no hint in the official reports that any increase took place. It is also difficult to imagine how Vaux would have paid these extra men if he did have them since the police department budget dropped steadily between 1855 and 1858 from $560,000 to $391,000.


Gillette himself noted that Price refused to back a prohibition bill in the legislature, so it is doubly hard to interpret his election as a triumph for drys.

As for the nativism issue, both Warner and Gillette made much of the fact that the first mayor elected after consolidation was a candidate of the Native American party. To be sure, Conrad was a conservative and an advocate of law and order and prohibition. He was endorsed by both the Prohibition party and the Native American party. But this does not necessarily explain his victory in the June, 1854 election. Indeed, there seemed to have been a good deal of surprise that he won so easily against the popular Democratic patrician reformer, Richard Vaux. It is important to remember that Conrad was also the Whig candidate for mayor. The Whigs were the major opposition party. Indeed the Whigs were gaining in strength in some quarters, because they were campaigning against the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which the Democratic Congress had just passed in May. The Act in effect repealed the Missouri Compromise and opened up once more the possibility of slavery in the plains states. Conrad thumped hard against the Kansas-Nebraska Act, calling it “the guiltiest political movement that darkens our history—guilty in the motives that prompted it—guilty in the measures adopted to secure its passage—and most guilty in the repeal of a sacred national compact.” The Whig North American in particular emphasized this issue and urged its readers to vote for Conrad in this light, arguing the day before the election that “If Mr. Vaux should be elected, his partisans will justly claim his success as a triumph of the Nebraska policy.”

22 Sunday Dispatch, February 26, 1854.
21 Warner refers to Conrad as a Native American (p. 156); Gillette refers to him as a nativist, and calls the election of 1854 a “triumph of the militant nativist faction” (p. 9). Geffen does not discuss Conrad or the election in her chapter, but Russell Weigley does in his (“The Border City in Civil War, 1854-1865”). He calls Conrad a Whig (“a Whig journalist and businessman”) and says he won by combining the Whig and Native American voting blocs (p. 369). The Sunday Dispatch (May 28, 1854) pointed out that Conrad had flip-flopped repeatedly in his career, working as the editor of the Democratic Daily Intelligencer briefly in the early 1830s, for example, before switching to the Whigs and running as their candidate for Register of Wills in 1843. Ever the opportunist, he courted also the nativist and temperance groups, and the Sunday Dispatch called him a “trimmer” whose career has been a “series of turnings, twistings, and summersaults.”

25 North American, June 6, 1854.
The *North American* had no doubts that the Kansas-Nebraska controversy contributed to the Whig sweep. The election “indicates in a marked and unmistakable manner, the sentiment of this community respecting the course of the Federal government in relation to the Nebraska bill,” the paper stated the day after the election.

We declared during the canvas that the popular vote, however it might turn out, would be understood at Washington as expressing either the sanction or the censure of citizens in reference to the action of the President and Congress touching that iniquitous measure. The issue was distinctly and generally made at the polls in every ward and precinct, and the voice of the majority is now uttered in accents of indignant denunciation against the Administration and its adherents.\(^{26}\)

The *Evening Bulletin* also agreed that the Kansas-Nebraska Act had been an important factor in the election.\(^{27}\)

It would not be entirely accurate, however, to say that national politics was the only issue in the mayoral campaign. Nativists and Prohibitionists backed Conrad for reasons other than his stand on the Kansas-Nebraska Act.\(^{28}\) Even the Whig *North American* admitted the significance of issues beside the Kansas-Nebraska Act. But the paper minimized the importance of the Native American party and Prohibition party support—mentioning neither party by name—concluding that the election did not mark “the special ascendency of this or that political association or creed.” The election would be best viewed, the paper said, not “exclusively as a Whig victory” but “as a triumph of popular intelligence and virtue, solicitous for the public welfare over party organizations and objects as such.”\(^{29}\) The *Pennsylvanian* was glum but perceptive. “The results have been accomplished by the union of the most diverse and contradictory elements, which have no common bond of feeling except a hatred of the Democratic party,” the paper said. “Every faction and every ism has been rallied against us. The old Whig party, the Native American,

\(^{26}\) Ibid., June 7, 1854.

\(^{27}\) *Evening Bulletin*, June 7, 1854.

\(^{28}\) *Sunday Dispatch*, June 11, 1854.

\(^{29}\) *North American*, June 8, 1854.
the ultra Temperance men, the Abolitionists have presented a solid
front in support of the opposition ticket.\textsuperscript{30}

In any event, the modernization interpretation of consolidation
seems to be a good deal more persuasive than social control. Both
Gillette and Geffen make the case that systems reform, broadly
construed, was the major concern of consolidation supporters by the
early 1850s. The region was indeed a fragmented metropolis. In
addition to the city and county, there were nine incorporated districts
(Northern Liberties, Kensington, Spring Garden, Southwark, Moy-
amensing, Penn, Richmond, West Philadelphia, and Belmont), six
boroughs (Manayunk, Germantown, Frankfort, White Hall, Brides-
burg, and Aramingo) and thirteen townships, for a total of thirty
governments in the county. With less than 30 percent of the popu-
lation within the city limits, it was time to take the metropolitan view,
so far as Eli Price was concerned. “Philadelphia is one community,”
he said,

one dense population, one town of houses standing together, and rapidly
advancing her streets and mural improvements upon the surrounding
fields; in nature, character, purposes, she is one community and should
be one city, one consolidated city, and not many corporations with many
attendant satellites moving in irregular orbits of neutralizing influence
and clashing in power.\textsuperscript{31}

An obvious question is why Philadelphia had not expanded earlier
beyond its original two-square-mile area. Part of the reason was the
strength of tradition in this very historically minded community.
Philadelphians were loath to tinker with the plan approved by William
Penn, the city’s founder, in 1682. Philadelphians also had not thought
much about annexing their suburbs because they were more or less
following the lead of the City of London—the historic core of the
metropolis and its financial center—as an independent polity even
smaller in size than Philadelphia. The City of London stood to lose
financially from consolidation, because it had substantial tax revenues
and financial privileges granted by the crown in earlier times, neither

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Pennsylvania}, June 7, 1854.
\textsuperscript{31} Price, \textit{Consolidation}, 64.
of which it cared to share with its neighbors.\textsuperscript{32} Philadelphians had no royal privileges, of course, but with their own booming tax base, many of them also regarded the suburbs as financial liabilities.

By the 1850s, however, that balance had shifted. Philadelphia's tax base was no longer so robust, and the suburbs were now worth courting. In a report endorsing consolidation prepared for the legislature, Eli Price pointed out that the value of real estate in Kensington rose 88 percent from $3.7 million to $7.1 million between 1844 and 1853. In Spring Garden, the increase was 65 percent from $9.1 million to $15.1 million, and by 1853 the total real estate valuation of suburban districts in Philadelphia County ($61.7 million) nearly equalled the assessed value of city real estate ($66.4 million).\textsuperscript{33}

Price also noted that consolidation would enhance the city's image. New York had passed Philadelphia to become the most populous city in the 1790s, but Philadelphia had at least remained a respectable second in the first half of the nineteenth century. By 1850, however, Philadelphia had dropped to fourth, surpassed by Boston and Baltimore, and was on the verge of dropping behind Cincinnati and New Orleans by the next census. These population figures were of great significance to urban boosters like Price. Consolidation would raise the city's population of 121,000 to the county's total of 409,000, making Philadelphia second only to New York in population, and largest in the nation in land area. To Price, these numbers represented a strong argument for consolidation: "It should not be that the city should sink to be an appendage to her own colonies, when by the enactment now recommended, she may instantly become first in size, the largest in the number of well-built houses, of all the cities in the Union."\textsuperscript{34}

As for the actual political events leading to consolidation, the

\textsuperscript{32} Price called the City of London's refusal to take the metropolitan view an example of "English resistance to change, partaking the character of Chinese fixedness, not to be imitated by progressive Americans"; \textit{History of Consolidation}, 13. The City of London finally joined in a new metropolitan government in 1888, but it retained many of its privileges until the twentieth century. See William A. Robson, \textit{The Government and Misgovernment of London} (London, 1939); also David Owen, \textit{The Government of Victorian London, 1855-1889: The Metropolitan Board of Works, The Vestries and the City Corporation} (Cambridge, Mass., 1982).

\textsuperscript{33} Price, \textit{Consolidation}, 57-59.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 60.
elections in the fall of 1853 deserve more attention than they received in the accounts of Warner and the others. For years the two major parties, the Whigs and Democrats, had endorsed the idea of consolidation but then let bills die in the legislature because they worried about what consolidation would do to their political strength. The Whigs controlled the city; the Democrats, the county. A letter signed "Tecumsah" in the *Public Ledger* of July, 1853 commented sarcastically on the situation: "When at Harrisburg, the Whigs of the city exhort their country Whig brethren to beware of supporting consolidation, as it will make Philadelphia a Democratic city; and per contra, the Democrats from the county warn the country Democratic members that the touch of consolidation is pollution and will swamp the Democracy and make Philadelphia all over Whig! Such has been, and such again will be the arguments of our 'disinterested? party representatives."

Despairing of their cause in the face of such political parochialism, consolidation backers decided to pick their own slate for state representatives in July, 1853. Acknowledging that Whigs and Democrats had supported consolidation in the past, members of the Consolidation party pointed out the failure of efforts spearheaded by the two major parties. It was time, the Consolidationists said, for some independent action. The Whig *Daily News* was in particular upset by the move, no doubt because many of the consolidation people were Whigs and the Whig ticket would lose votes. The *Daily News* attacked the new party, calling it an embarrassment to the consolidation cause, and dismissed its organizers as "political hucksters who are disowned by all the political organizations which exist in our community" and "real estate brokers and speculators who would make immense fortunes."36 If Consolidation party leaders really wanted results, the paper said, "Let them await the action of the regular party organizations now about presenting their candidates and there will probably be no difficulty for them to unite upon a set of candidates who have not only the ability and the will to secure a consolidation charter but

35 *Public Ledger*, July 28, 1853.
36 *Daily News*, August 17, 1853.
who have no private interests of their own to serve and will, therefore, secure one as the people may want and the public interests demand."  

As it turned out, all the parties in the city and suburbs, including the Native American party, endorsed consolidation. The Consolidation party hesitated about running its own ticket now that consolidation had support among the regular parties, but it finally picked a slate in late September, not long before the October 11 election. The Consolidationists did well in the city, with Price winning the Senate seat from a Whig, and Consolidationists took three of the four Assembly seats, also from Whigs. The party did not do quite as well in the suburbs, losing the senatorial race and taking only four of eleven Assembly seats. The winners in nearly all the other county races were popular Whigs and Democrats who had assured voters that they supported consolidation.

Law-and-order issues do not seem to have been important in the election. John Keyser, the Native American police marshal, lost to the Democrat John Murphy in his bid for re-election. Keyser had been an effective marshal; it seems unlikely that he would have lost if law and order were still an important issue. Keyser seems to have lost for party reasons. He had been elected in 1850 as a candidate of both the Whigs and Native Americans; in 1853 the Whigs decided to back their own candidate, and this took enough votes away from Keyser to give Murphy a narrow victory. In any event, the new marshal, a militia colonel, was considered competent enough, and a capable police force awaited his command. As the *Evening Bulletin* put it, "In a word, fair weather and a good crew meet Mr. Murphy; storms and unaccustomed hands were the destiny of Mr. Keyser; and the public, conscious of this, will judge the success by a different standard from his predecessor. Marshal Keyser produced order out of chaos. His administration was always progressive, so to speak. Marshal Murphy must remember that, at the end of his term, he will owe a similar improvement to the public."  

On the prohibition issue, the *Sunday Dispatch* was concerned that the influence of the drys might grow because they endorsed the Consolidation ticket, but this did not seem a major concern in the

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37 Ibid., August 10, 1853.  
campaign. In reply to the *Sunday Dispatch*, the *Evening Bulletin* editorialized, "The consolidation candidates were chosen solely as friends of consolidation. It was not inquired whether they were friends of a Prohibitory Liquor Law or of a Paid Fire Department. Some of the candidates may be opposed to both, and for aught that we know to the contrary, may be interested in their defeat." As for Price, the *Bulletin* continued, "It was purely as a consolidation man that he was chosen. Any other measures that have become mixed up in the contest were after-thoughts, and it is the part of true friends of consolidation to lay these aside until this one vital measure is accomplished." After the election, the *Sunday Dispatch* still had its doubts: "If it had been presented upon its own merits, freed from the incubii which were permitted to fasten upon it, the results on last Tuesday would have been more signal and glorious than it has been." The paper argued that the election was a victory for political reform, noting that "The Triumph of Consolidation—for such is the result in City and County—is a striking rebuke to pot-house politicians, managers of conventions, tax-collectors and pullers of the small wires."

The record indicates substantial consensus over consolidation in the events that followed the election. Shortly after the election in October, a non-partisan committee of over one hundred Philadelphians representing all districts of the metropolis was selected to prepare a city charter for presentation to the legislature. The group met regularly throughout the fall and published its minutes in the daily papers. In December the committee approved the completed charter and sent it to Harrisburg. Concern surfaced briefly in January when the Whig-controlled city councils raised questions about the new charter's effect on the city's trust funds. This was evidently a bogus issue, but the Consolidationists feared this was a sign that the councils might cause trouble in Harrisburg.

The consolidation committee met immediately to consider a response to the councils. Frederick Fraley, a prominent Whig, condemned the council action, arguing they were "unadvised" and declaring such action on the councils' part would "be viewed as a demonstration of the Whig party of Philadelphia to oppose the passage

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39 Ibid., September 28, 1853; *Sunday Dispatch*, September 25, 1853.
40 *Sunday Dispatch*, October 16, 1853.
of the bill." Fraley blamed the incident on patronage workers worried about their jobs and reminded Philadelphians that consolidation was of such vital importance that it should make "party questions subordinate to the public good." Democrat James Page also came to the defense of the charter, assuring everyone that his party was taking no action to oppose the bill. "Northern Liberties, the cradle of Democracy, has sent its potential voice up in favor of Consolidation."

The show of bipartisan support no doubt helped bring the councils in line and end the episode. Later in January the Pennsylvania Assembly approved the charter with minor amendments. The Senate accepted the Assembly bill and the governor signed the bill on February 2, 1854. The *Evening Bulletin* was pleased but a bit melancholy about what the delays in consolidation had done to the city. "If the law just passed had been in existence twenty years ago," the paper editorialized wistfully,

> Philadelphia would have been, by this time, fifty years in advance of her actual condition. St. Louis, Chicago, and New Orleans would have been nearer to us by hundreds of miles, through the energetic construction of public improvements. She would have had numerous lines of her own ocean steamers, which would have saved her from the present discreditable dependence upon New York. Her population would have been at least fifty percent greater than it is; her foreign commerce would have been ten fold of what now is; her domestic trade would have been commensurate with her marine and her means of communication with the interior; her wealth would have been inconceivably larger than it is now, and she would have maintained the rank she lost of being the first city in the American Union.  

The enthusiasm of the *North American* was more typical.

All of us today may feel we are citizens of a new city. The Act of Consolidation has a creative power, not only in changing the corporate form and relations, but in imparting a fresh and original vitality to the great municipal organization it has called into being. The Philadelphia we have known heretofore—the Philadelphia founded by Penn and his associates, and which has endured through so protracted and eventful

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a period since its origin—has ceased to be, in one sense, having by the magic operation of a legislative enactment, undergone a transformation which at once not only magnifies it immensely in physical proportions, but invests it with a moral dignity, and quickens it with a social spirit hitherto unknown in its experience.  

Troops from the militia under the supervision of police marshal Murphy fired a cannon salute on February 2 when word arrived that the bill had been signed. The city celebrated on March 11, with a parade, a steamboat excursion, and a gala ball for the visiting dignitaries from Harrisburg. Independence Hall was the center of the festivities. Over its entrance hung a huge transparency with the City coat-of-arms in the center. On each side were Grecian columns with a wreath bearing the names of all the districts, boroughs, and townships. These all had "an existence in the old order of things," the Sunday Dispatch reported, "but are now part and parcel of the great metropolis of Pennsylvania."  

So a new Philadelphia was created, and created in a reasonably democratic fashion with community involvement. The new charter—which Philadelphians more or less wrote entirely themselves—also reflected a democratic spirit in providing for the election of a large number of previously appointed officials. These included the city treasurer, tax assessors, guardians of the poor, directors of the public schools, and members of the board of health. In addition, the charter created two new posts—Receiver of Taxes and City Controller—and they too were to be elected positions. It was "the obvious current of popular opinion to elect all officers having important public functions to perform” said a memorial to the legislature when Philadelphians offered a similar bill in 1850, and they kept those provisions in when consolidation finally succeeded.  

Under the new charter, the wards were also to elect their tax assessors, guardians of the poor, and school directors, as well as their

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43 North American, February 4, 1854.  
44 Sunday Dispatch, March 12, 1854.  
45 Memorial to Senate and Representatives of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in favor of consolidating the City and Districts of Philadelphia (Philadelphia, 1850), 16; details of charter from Consolidation Bill, As Its Finally Passed the Legislature of Pennsylvania, January 31, 1854 (Philadelphia, 1854). Both documents are in the library of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
aldermen and their representatives on the board of health, so that the ward in many respects became a sub-community within the expanded metropolis. Gillette says the "end result" of the new ward system "was the standardization of political representation out of respect for the impersonal factors of population count rather than the conversation of established identities." This seems an overly severe assessment. To be sure, there was some loss of local identity as populous suburbs like Kensington and Northern Liberties were divided and the rural townships were lumped together to create wards of relatively similar populations, but the lines were drawn by the local committee that framed the charter. There seems to have been little controversy over their adoption.

The editor of the *Germantown Telegraph* (who also served on the committee) was especially pleased with the results for "the country wards," saying they were "well arranged."* Germantown and neighboring Bristol townships were joined together to create the twenty-second ward, and Manayunk, Roxborough, and a part of Penn township were joined to create the twenty-first ward in an area with natural boundaries formed by the Wissahickon Creek on the east and the Schuylkill on the west. The biggest ward was the twenty-third in the sparsely settled Northeast, where the new charter accommodated local identities by stipulating that the ward's four aldermen be elected by area, with one from Delaware, Moreland, and Byberry townships; one from Oxford and Lower Dublin; one from the Borough of Frankford and Whitehall; and one from the rest of the ward. In addition, the new charter respected the existing provisions for the poor in the twenty-first, twenty-second, and twenty-third wards by stating that there would be no elections for guardians of the poor "where houses of accommodation of the poor are provided for," unless the local voters decided otherwise, an arrangement that allowed the country wards rebates on their city taxes. The charter also exempted suburban wards from taxes for center-city improvements, and it stip-

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*Gillette, "The Emergence of the Metropolis," 12.

*Germantown Telegraph*, December 28, 1853. Kenneth T. Jackson, in his article and book cited in footnote 1 (pp. 452 and 148, respectively), says suburbanites rejected consolidation and sent to Harrisburg "delegation after delegation to oppose it." Strong opposition may have existed earlier, but this clearly was not the case by 1854 and it seems a bit unsporting for Jackson to include Philadelphia among examples of "forced annexation."
ulated that the new city would assume the debts of the formerly independent suburban governments. This latter provision led to controversy; many of the suburbs had hurriedly spent monies on civic improvements just before consolidation took place. To cut the spending short, the consolidation bill—which ended the autonomy of the suburban governments—was sent to the governor while he was on a business trip to Erie, to get his signature without awaiting his return to Harrisburg. In any event, we see a good deal of respect for the suburbs in the charter as well as a good deal of Jacksonian democracy in the large number of offices to be filled by popular vote. It would not be unreasonable to say that Philadelphia had a liberal charter. It would also be fair to say that Philadelphia was the first American city to create a government that was truly regional in scope, its 130 square miles far larger than any city at the time (including New York, which then comprised only the twenty-four square miles of Manhattan Island). In light of its accomplishments, Philadelphia could be called something of a pioneer on the nineteenth-century urban frontier. As we have seen, it has mostly received brickbats from historians, the prevalent view being that consolidation was not democracy at work but instead the triumph of a narrow-minded conservatism that opposed immigrants and supported police and efficiency. Perhaps it is time to reassess such negative historical assumptions.

Philadelphia

Michael P. McCarthy

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48 Allison and Penrose, *A History of Municipal Development*, 142. Apparently, the city politicians were also able to take advantage of the debt provisions, and Allison and Penrose say city and suburb “vied with each other in the reckless increase of debt,” adding $4.5 million in thirty days. The new city started out with a $17.1 million debt.

49 In 1898 New York joined Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and Staten Island to create a regional metropolis 299 square miles in size; by the turn of the century, Chicago was also regional in size at 190 square miles. These cities (and others in the East and Midwest) grew little in area in the twentieth century; by contrast, cities in the Sunbelt grew explosively. Los Angeles, Houston, and Dallas, for example, in 1980 were 465, 556, and 378 square miles, respectively. The aggressive annexation policy of many of the Sunbelt cities explains in part why many have such impressive population growth statistics.